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Defending Defense Secrets

A spy case shows more must be done.

By Henry Eason

ONE CAN'T BE out in the cold all the time; one has to come in from the cold." So spoke a British spymaster in one of John Le Carré's espionage tales.

James Durward Harper, Jr., reportedly described his own plight in similar terms when, an FBI document says, he tried to come in from the cold before his arrest for selling more than \$250,000 worth of American military secrets to the Polish intelligence service.

Harper has been cooperating with federal authorities, they say, since the government spurned his offer to become a double agent in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

The story is one that could have come from a novel. But the disturbing reality is that Harper's wife—an alcoholic secretary at a Palo Alto, Calif., data processing firm—siphoned hundreds of pounds of documents from the U.S. Army's highly secret Ballistics Missiles Defense Advanced Technology Center in Huntsville, Ala.

Over several years, Ruby Schuler Harper gave the stolen materials to her husband, the FBI alleges. Together, one financially strapped couple compromised the nation's ability to defend its land-based intercontinental nuclear missiles from a pre-emptive strike by the Soviet Union.

The Harper case is the most recent—and most dramatic—indication that there are holes in the security screen the government has tried to erect between Soviet spies and the more than 1 million people who perform work for

the Pentagon.

In its June edition, NATION'S BUSINESS warned that Defense Department clearance methods for military contractors' personnel are inadequate. The Harper case underscores some of the major security flaws cited in the article.

On October 16, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents arrested Harper, a Silicon Valley computer engineer, at his Mountain View, Calif., home. He is charged with espionage and is facing possible life imprisonment.

Ruby Harper escaped prosecution. She died at the age of 39 on June 22 of cirrhosis of the liver. But defense contractors have much to learn by focusing on her role in the theft of Army documents.

Mrs. Harper was given the Defense Investigative Service's customary security clearance review in 1972, when she joined Systems Control, Inc., of Palo Alto. She was a secretary-bookkeeper, but because of the highly classified nature of SCI's work for the Defense Department she was given a "secret" grade security clearance.

Though not trained to understand the complicated nature of the work that SCI performed for military facilities, she had access to vital materials.

Friends have said she developed a drinking problem, one that was evident to some of her co-workers. She also obtained a divorce from the man she was married to before she met Harper. Her lifestyle changed—a sign, American spy hunters believe, that a person

in a sensitive job may become susceptible to Communist overtures.

Thomas O'Brien, director of the Defense Investigative Service, says it is not the Service's custom to reinvestigate defense industry workers, unless their actions arouse suspicion.

The service's 1,153 agents are too overworked to keep pace with the security clearances required for new defense employees. The agents perform about 180,000 such investigations annually, and in recent years DIS has been plagued with backlogs.

THE HARPER case also illustrates what can happen when a defense contractor's physical plant security is not tight.

Even large defense manufacturers with hundreds of uniformed security officers and careful procedures are susceptible to theft. Since 1977 both TRW and Hughes Aircraft secrets were stolen by Americans working for Soviet bloc spy services.

Greater risk is found with the small emerging firms, says FBI counterintelligence chief Edward O'Malley. The smaller the company, the more lax the security procedures tend to be. Some firms, the FBI says, see security as red tape.

Government officials are not commenting on the Harper case, beyond citing those details of their investigation that are pertinent to Harper's prosecution. But it is clear that the country's most recent spy scandal will put a more intense spotlight on how defense workers are cleared to work on secret projects and on how defense contractors live up to the security requirements the Defense Department mandates for all of its sensitive military programs. □